

Sketch

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The Code

Agda Gronbach*

*Iowa State College

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Suggested by Robert Frost's

"THE CODE"

Agda Gronbech

WITH one breath mingled scent of rain and hay.
Beside her pail of scrubbing, Sander's wife
Was seen to pause and push the wisp of gray
Behind her ear. In doing this she glanced
Across the spotless threshold to the barn.
There was unusual hurry in the air
Out where the men were working with the hay.
The clouds were threatening, true.

And quickly then
She finished the one stretch of uncleaned floor
And hurried out to gather eggs and feed
The set of last new chickens.

From the barn
The banter of men hard at work was stopped.
She saw her husband walking toward the mill,
And slowly grind the rope which kept in check
The great wheel from the rising, blackened wind.
He straightened, but his broad, proud shoulders stooped.
All hay-besmear'd from tousled head to tip
Of dusty boot, he came on toward the house.
How strange it was to see her husband so,
Whose lofty and high manner she was wont
To cover well and softly with a look
Or word of kindness.

Just last fall.
That hired man from way across the grove
Had left all in a huff about his work.
An aching in her heart, she'd packed his lunch
And given him her husband's coat to wear.

The man had stood beside the sagging gate
Between the two white pines, to smile and say,
"John Sanders ain't deserving sech as you.
He likes to tell men how to do their work,
And that ain't done around these parts.
He works, it's true. But men don't bow to work!
But thank ye, Ma'am." And saying this he'd left
And she had known that what he said was true.

So often she had pondered o'er this thing:
That John was all she had and proud she was
But he could not see hired men as men.
His driving them or leading them to work
Would surely cause him pain. Her love for him
Had wished so often that the world might see
How fine he was beneath that driving love
Of jobs well done and all men working hard.

The sun had set in purple clouds and red
When she at length came slowly to the door
To find her husband by the kitchen stove
All huddled in the dusk there, shoulders drooped.
He heard her swish of apron to the flies,
And as she slammed the screen door he arose.
"The men won't eat with us tonight," he said.
There was just that and then he paused, still drooped.

Again she knew the long and weary fear.
Beside the sink and roller towel she turned.
"There are some new peas in the garden now,
And rain a-coming on, they should be picked.
Do you have time?"

She asked that, all intent
As though her very life were in those words,
And he walked slowly, firmly toward the garden.